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Alcimedès 18/6

Assisting suicide remains illegal in England and Wales under the Suicide Act 1961, one of the few pieces of legislation where the protagonist is innocent, but the assistant is guilty. In May 2011, Switzerland undertook a referendum on this highly emotive subject and subsequently announced that the Swiss people were in favour of maintaining their laissez-faire approach to assisted suicide, and rejected a ban on assisted suicide and “Suicide tourism”.¹ Such a stance is notoriously liberal compared with many countries across the globe, and has resulted in hundreds of suicide tourists travelling thousand of miles to avoid their relatives being prosecuted. Two of the more famous names associated with assisted suicide are the Swiss-based *Dignitas* and *Exit International*. *Dignitas*, founded by the Swiss lawyer Ludwig Minelli in 1998, advocates an oral anti-emetic followed 30 min later by a lethal overdose of the barbiturate Nembutal.² *Exit International* was formed in 1997 by the Australian Physician Dr Philip Nitschke, and now has offices in Europe and USA. Amongst their options is the Exit Euthanasia Device, a nitrogen-filled barbecue bottle linked to a tube and polythene bag.³

In its relatively short existence, the Internet has seen its fair share of crazes crossing the World. One of the more bizarre entries on this list is the act of “Planking” whereby individuals take pictures of themselves lying horizontally faced-down in unusual places. The images are then posted onto the Web, presumably to the amusement of friends and workmates, but inevitably to the curiosity of those who are older and possibly wiser. Among the more outlandish locations recorded have been railway lines, cliff tops and motorways. Unfortunately, the inevitable has happened, with the World’s first “Planking death” being announced in Brisbane, Australia. Twenty year old Acton Beale lay briefly on a seventh floor balcony, only to lose his balance and plunge to his death.⁴

Alcimedès wonders whether Plankers will increasingly feature in the annual Darwin Awards, which honours evolution in action and “those who improve the species...by accidentally removing themselves from it”.⁵

A recent study published in the *Lancet* has highlighted worrying mortality rates for teenagers across the World. Indeed, death rates are now approximately three times higher in young men compared with infant boys, which they attribute to gang warfare, drug use and addiction to motor vehicles. (*Alcimedès notes that “Planking” does not yet feature.*) In 50 years, the worldwide death rate has approximately halved in young men (15–24) whereas death rates have fallen by almost 90% in infants. Writing in *The Lancet*, Dr Michael Resnick commented that “*Breakthroughs in medical discovery and service delivery are incomplete responses to the health threats faced by young people, in view of the profound role of socioeconomic conditions, access to education, and opportunity as determinants of life trajectory*”.⁶

Meanwhile, a study of mortality rates in children in the UK has demonstrated a significant decrease in violent deaths in children

over the past three decades, although deaths from assaults have risen in adolescent boys.⁷ The annual death rate in infants due to assault fell from 5.6/100,000 infants to 0.7/100,000 infants per year; for children aged 1–14 years, the rate dropped from 0.6 to 0.2/100,000 children per year. The researchers propose that the reduction in deaths signifies a real improvement in protecting children, rather than a statistical blip due to re-categorisation of figures.

Put into plain statistics, the authors state that “Each year five to 15 infants, 15 to 45 children and 32 to 117 adolescents die violent deaths”.

The London-based children’s charity NSPCC recently revealed that the number of children it referred from its services to the police and social services has reached an all-time high in its 127-year history. With 16,385 cases being referred on in the year to 2010/2011, this represented a 37% increase on the previous year. More than a third of these cases involved families not previously known to the local authorities. 46% of contacts made to the helpline were forwarded on to local authorities.

However, the charity argued that these figures reflected greater awareness of child abuse, rather than an increase in abuse against children. The head of the NSPCC’s Helpline service, John Cameron, said, “The increase in referrals over the last year shows more people want to play their part in keeping children safe”.⁸

The Home Office has confirmed that the Child Sex Offender Disclosure Scheme is now available in all 43 Police Forces in England and Wales.⁹ The scheme, which was first piloted in 2008, is commonly known as Sarah’s Law in memory of 8-year old Sarah Payne who was murdered by paedophile Roy Whiting in 2000. Sarah’s mother, Sara, has championed this cause for many years, along with the tabloid newspaper *The News of the World*. The scheme allows for parents, guardians and carers to formally ask the police if someone has a record for child sex offences.

A US-study has proposed that the number of rapes committed in the DR Congo is far higher than previously suspected.¹⁰ In the *Estimates and Determinants of Sexual Violence Against Women* study, which used figures from a 2007 government health study, it is suggested that 400,000 women and girls were raped in the year 2006–7. This equated to the headline-grabbing figure of “48 women and girls raped per hour” that featured across the media and overwhelms the previously-quoted UN figure of 16,000 rapes of women and girls per year.

Establishing accurate figures in war zones is notoriously difficult but, whatever the correct figure, such estimates clearly represent a monumental crime.

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